

Repositioning the Swellendam Municipal Area as a Tourist Destination: Trends, Destination Marketing and Place Branding

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Abstract

In 2017 the Swellendam Tourism Bureau's board adopted a new marketing brand for the municipality under the banner *Cape Trade Route*. The brand was introduced without using any market intelligence to inform it. The Swellendam Municipality subsequently resolved that any new tourism strategy had to be informed by current market research, including media, trade and industry sentiments about the region. This paper reports on five sets of empirical evidence collected by various means to better understand Swellendam's tourism brand and marketing strategies. They are (1) workshops with business and community roleplayers; (2) an online questionnaire survey conducted with tourist-aligned enterprises in the Swellendam municipal area; (3) a content analysis of traditional and social media relating to Swellendam; (4) a visitor interview survey; and (5) a snap review of sixteen tour operators' opinions about Swellendam as a tourism region. The findings highlight the crucial role of sound market intelligence in creating tourism marketing strategies for municipalities. The reported findings and the recommendations made have subsequently informed the municipality's spatial development framework and tourism strategy.

Keywords: Tourism branding, tourism marketing, Western Cape, Overberg region, visitor survey, Swellendam

Introduction

Branding is an essential tool in marketing strategies (Kemp, Childers & Williams, 2012). Place branding, according to Anholt (2009), should encompass the richness and complexity of places, from the tiniest village to the largest urban places. This enables flourishing of endeavours such as tourism promotion and tourism economic development (McManus & Connell, 2014). Govers (2011: 229) quoted in McManus and Connell (2014: 106) maintains that the assumption that "just a destination branding programme [implying a tourism campaign] can change place image is rather ambitious" because of "the complexity of places but also because people's perceptions are influenced by many factors". Thus, according to Donaldson (2018) a clear distinction must be made between place branding and destination marketing. Place branding concentrates on the image and the reputation of a location, that is all the communications about a place's identity. Slogans and their accompanying taglines have become the new face of place branding. Destination marketing aims to attract visitors, tourists and new residents. Destination

marketing “is likely to emphasise advertising (albeit not in isolation)” (McManus & Connell, 2014: 107). Negative images or stereotypical perceptions of a destination are central challenges in tourism marketing as changing them is a formidable task (Ritchie, Sanders & Mules, 2007) that is made more difficult by a media sales model that thrives on imparting ‘bad news’. Moreover, improper destination marketing can impact negatively on place branding. Destination marketing organisations (DMOs) need to embrace destination marketing in a holistic manner, with a long-term view that includes linked marketing activities (Kankhuni, 2020).

Swellendam, a town in the Western Cape province of South Africa, is located some 220 km from Cape Town and is the headquarters of the Swellendam Municipality. The municipal area includes seven towns, namely Swellendam, Barrydale, Suurbraak, Buffeljagsrivier, Malgas, Infanta and Stormsvlei. Tourism-wise, Swellendam has traditionally been a one-night stopover between Cape Town and the Garden Route. This reliance on one type of tourist is both problematic and risky, especially when the market sector is inherently seasonal, making it difficult to sustain business and employment during the Western Cape’s wet winters. In 2017 the Swellendam Municipality’s integrated development plan (IDP) (2017-2022) announced the adoption of a new marketing brand for the municipal area, namely the singular slogan or banner of *Cape Trade Route* (Swellendam Municipality, 2017). This initiative was driven by the, now defunct Swellendam Tourism Board that comprised nine members of the local tourism industry. The *Cape Trade Route* brand was an attempt to maximise and exploit market trends using innovative technology and visual aids to entice new business and to increase visitor numbers by emphasising the supposedly unique, sustained trading history and by marketing the area under a consolidated banner. But the launch of *Cape Trade Route* came as a surprise to most tourism stakeholders and residents alike. For many the slogan was also incorrect as the area was not known as a historical trade route. The subsequent outcry led to a decision that any new tourism strategy had to be informed by current market research and the sentiments of the media, trade and industry regarding the region.

Study area

The municipality comprising of the seven towns (Figure 1) is located within the Overberg district of the Western Cape.

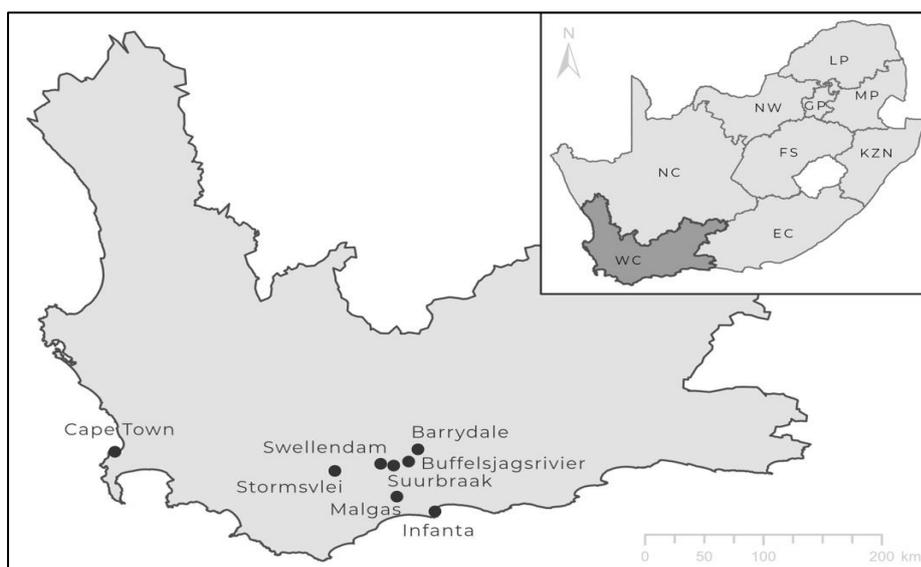


Figure 1: The Western Cape showing the small towns that comprise the Swellendam Municipality

Although tourism in the region has been declining since 2010, tourism remains one of the premier employment creators in the Swellendam municipal area. The Swellendam Municipality's aspiration is to see the overall tourism income increase from R1.3 million in 2020 to R2.53 million in 2025 through sustained municipal funding to generate increased tourist income by promoting joint marketing activities with commercial partners (Swellendam Municipality, 2017).

Methodology

In order to get a holistic understanding of the tourism context and branding of the Swellendam municipal area as a tourism destination, the authors were contracted by the municipality to collect five sets of empirical evidence. First, the destination management and tourism marketing agency *Destinate* facilitated several engagement sessions with business and community members from the Swellendam region between November 2018 and March 2019 in Swellendam and Barrydale. The initial engagement sessions were aimed at unpacking the process of tourism strategy development, collecting input from the community on local tourism opportunities within the context of international travel trends, and identifying immediate deliverables. The sessions also strived to achieve consensus regarding which key areas to focus on, as well as to secure community buy-in. The sessions were well attended and allowed for robust debate, conversation and interaction. Second, an anonymous online questionnaire survey was conducted among businesses involved in the tourism sector in the Swellendam region. The survey questionnaire aimed to elicit responses on the status of tourism in the region, the tourism business needs, the requirements of a tourism organisation and the kind of tourism-promoting entity that should be established in the municipality. A total of 94 respondents participated but only 37 questionnaires were completed fully. Third, a content analysis review by BrandsEye of media sentiments about Swellendam was used to segment the social media conversational data into neutral, positive and negative fractions. The sentiment-bearing (non-neutral) data was verified and tagged by the BrandsEye Crowd programme to distinguish relevant topics in the conversations.

Fourth, a snap review was completed of Western Cape-based tour operators' opinions about Swellendam as a tourism region. A database of 49 tour operators' contact details was given to the researchers by the municipality. Another 28 operators' information was obtained from the City of Cape Town's tour operator website database. A link to a Google Forms online questionnaire survey was emailed to all the operators listed in the composite database. Only 16 completed questionnaires were obtained as some operators did not respond and others declined the invitation. As some operators' information was incorrect, they could not be contacted, and others had ceased to operate.

Fifth, a structured interview survey was conducted among visitors to the region and the province. The survey targeted persons who had travelled to locations in the previous six months or would be travelling to locations in South Africa in the next six months. The interviews covered the profile of the respondents, their source markets and travel patterns. Respondents were asked what attracted them to typical rural destinations such as the Swellendam region. Visitors were also questioned about their knowledge of the region, and requested to identify, from a list of places, the features, landscapes, activities they associate with the region. Furthermore, the respondents were specifically asked about their awareness of the *Cape Trade Route* brand. A multistage and cluster sampling framework was designed. Five clusters of areas where travellers typically converge were purposively identified, namely Cape Town International Airport, OR Tambo International Airport, three major Cape Town tourist attractions (V&A Waterfront, Two Oceans Aquarium, Table Mountain Cableway), the Swellendam municipal area and two main entry point towns into the province in the Karoo

along the N1 (Beaufort West and Laingsburg). Respondents were selected by means of convenience sampling. Interviewing was done on predetermined dates. The interviews were surveys conducted in the five clusters with specific target proportions set for each area, namely 41% of interviews at the two airports, 39% in Cape Town, 11% in Swellendam region and 8% in the Karoo. After many unsuccessful attempts to organise permits to conduct interviews at the OR Tambo airport the original five clusters and survey proportions were adapted. Five fieldworkers conducted a total of 768 personal face-to-face interviews between 4 December 2018 and 11 January 2019. The responses of those who had visited Swellendam in the six months prior to the survey date were used for the analysis reported in this paper. The analysis was done using SPSS.

Tourism branding: A literature overview

Although this paper reflects on a diversity of information (collected from different sources using five methods on the tourism industry in the Swellendam municipal area, the primary purpose of the research was to get a deeper understanding of the context of the tourism brand and marketing of the study area. Therefore, in this section the concept of tourism branding is briefly unpacked. Destination branding is considered to be the steps taken by a DMO, in collaboration with its stakeholders, to develop and communicate an identity and personality for the organisation's destination. This created identity has to be different from those of competing destinations, that is it has to stand out among its competitors which is the essential purpose of branding (Morrison, 2018; Almeyda-Ibáñez & George, 2017; Almeyda-Ibáñez & Babu, 2017). The fundamental aim of destination branding is to give added value to create meaning for a place (Andersson, 2014). In addition, according to Donaldson (2018: 45) branding promotes both tangible and intangible attributes that “compete for a share of consumers, tourists, businesses, investments and skilled workers. Place branding differentiates one tourism spot from similar tourism experiences in other locales.” Moreover, it endorses the cultural distinctiveness and uniqueness of a tourism experience. The branding of places that are similar in geography, offering and cultural context, and are in close proximity to one another, is a more intricate and challenging process than the branding of services and goods (Donaldson, 2018, 2021, Donaldson & Duckitt, 2020). There is thus a conceptual relationship between geography and branding, i.e. how the notion of branding can be understood in geographical terms. Place branding has also been discussed in the “relationship between products and the place-bound symbolic qualities of a geographic region where a product is produced” (Andersson, 2014: 143).

Since Pike's (2005: 258) assertion, a decade and a half ago, that “very little published branding research provides pragmatic guides for destination marketing organisations”, tourism scholarship has become replete with studies examining and providing guidance concerning branding, imaging and marketing. Kavaratzis and Ashworth (2015) have for example, distinguished four types of place-branding studies: “managerial studies (examining the development of place brands as a result of a managerial process); integrated studies (examining place brand in connection with wider processes and then integrating these in the branding process); critical studies (revealing implicit goals and agendas of place brands); and a culturally informed approach to place” (quoted in Donaldson, 2018: 50). The first step in branding is to determine an image (Donaldson, 2018). In order to brand or image a place, a story must be told about the place. There needs to be a coherent theme in the story that resonates with visitors, but marketers “should be wary of presenting too many stories. This is a risk for DMOs that do not know what their central story is. A common default of destination marketers is to claim, ‘We have something for everyone’. Ironically, this has the effect of positioning the destination as having nothing for anyone. A single message told well is usually more effective than a claim

of universal appeal” (Smith, 2015: 227). The veracity of this statement is neatly captured in the Swellendam study area’s official policy framework, namely that “each town and community is different in character. Differentiation at this level is crucial and holds the key to the success and sustainability of tourism in the region” (Swellendam Municipality, 2020: 20).

McManus and Connell (2014) summarised Anholt’s (2008) five innovative ideas about place branding or competitive identity as: “(1) A need for clear and coordinated communications to influence public opinion; (2) Recognition of the importance of brand image even though a brand is not under the direct control of an ‘owner’; (3) The importance of brand equity is a highly valuable asset that needs to be managed; (4) Recognition that brand purpose is critical and that brand management is an internal project; and (5) Sustained and coherent innovation is more important than recalling past glories” (quoted in Donaldson, 2018: 47).

Regarding tourism marketing, a destination brand is defined as the “marketing activities that: (1) support the creation of a name, symbol, logo, word mark or other graphic that readily identifies and differentiates a destination; that (2) consistently convey the expectation of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination; that (3) serve to consolidate and reinforce the emotional connection between the visitor and the destination; and that (4) reduce consumer search costs and perceived risk. Collectively, these activities serve to create a destination image that positively influences consumer destination choice” (Blain, Levy & Ritchie, 2005: 337). Therefore, from a marketing point of view, it is important to understand aspects of destination image that are held in common with other members of a particular group. The definition of destination image advanced by Lawson and Baud-Bovy (1977) encompasses the personal images and the stereotyped images shared by groups such as imaginations and emotional thoughts a group or an individual might have of a particular place (Cudny, 2020). Tourist destination images are vital because they influence the decision-making behaviour of potential tourists as well as the levels of satisfaction regarding the tourist experience. The six P-dimensions of Anholt (2006) can best describe a small town’s image, namely “(1) Presence, a town’s international and/or national standing; (2) Place, the perceptions of the physical aspects of towns; (3) Potential, economic and educational opportunities; (4) Pulse, urban lifestyle; (5) People, the relationship of residents to outsiders; and (6) Prerequisites, the perception of the basic qualities of a town” (quoted in Donaldson, 2018: 49). If a town does not have a unique tourism resource, it “enters the realm of generic attractions and the intense competition to draw visitors” because what makes communities “distinctive is their own geography and history” (Murphy & Murphy, no date and no page number).

Results

Until 2018 there was a service-level agreement in place between the Swellendam Municipality and the Swellendam Tourism Bureau (STB) which was mandated to develop tourism activities and to market Swellendam as a tourism destination. The municipality funded the STB to the tune of R1.2 million per annum to carry out the mandate. Given the critical challenges faced by the municipality to deliver services and pursue sustainable development, tourism has been identified as a sector that is adversely affected by the lack of marketing and branding, insufficient equipment and tourism not being fully representative of all the local communities. Reasons for these problems are limited collaboration with the STB, no municipal officer being dedicated to tourism, the link between tourism and local economic development, and absence of a tourism strategy (Swellendam Municipality, 2015). The then existing tourism destination marketing message was also identified as a weakness in the IDP (Swellendam Municipality, 2017).

Consequently, in 2019 the Swellendam Municipality disbanded the STB and seated the tourism function in the office of the municipal manager. In view of the misplaced destination branding of the municipal area as the *Cape Trade Route*, the municipality made a decision that a new tourism strategy (inclusive of a new brand of tourism offering) had to be informed by current market research and the sentiments of media, trade and industry about the region. The findings of the engagements with a range of stakeholders and role players in the tourism industry are discussed next.

Business and community engagement

Residents are largely neglected in place branding practice and their priorities are often misunderstood, “even though they are not passive beneficiaries but are active partners and co-producers of public goods, services and policies” (Braun, Kavaratzis & Zenker, 2013: 19). For this reason, the voices of members from the community who directly represent the tourism industry were listed. During the first engagement sessions the essence of the Swellendam region was considered with specific engagement on Barrydale as a town in the Swellendam municipal area. The key icons and the assets that give the region its unique sense of place and differentiate it from the competition were debated. Global tourism trends were discussed and those that could impact beneficially on Swellendam region were singled out for use to give the region an edge over its competitors. Attention was given to unpacking the region’s tourism potential, to identifying the favourable opportunities for tourism development in the Swellendam region and to pinpoint areas that should be prioritised in a new tourism strategy. The sessions were also designed to obtain the tourism industry’s input on a new structure for tourism in the study area.

The consultations with local government and the tourism industry resulted in the drawing up of a comprehensive list of priorities which was largely drawn from the experience of the 2017 tourism strategy of the Saldanha Bay Municipality. They are:

- “The need for more effective communication channels, specifically between the private sector, the municipality and tourism” structures;
- “The need to build a strong local brand and identity;
- The need for sustainable local tourism development that appeals to travellers” and gives them a reason to stay longer;
- Work “together in a tourism value chain to promote the region collectively”;
- Include community tourism experiences in the overall tourism offering;
- “Align better with national, provincial and other regional tourism organisations and identify suitable and mutually beneficial joint marketing initiatives;”
- Develop routes to connect the towns within the region so improving the intra-regional distribution of visitors;
- Bring the “region’s interesting history alive through local storytelling”;
- Devise “an aligned events calendar and a flagship festival or event for the region”;
- Improve funding for tourism development and promotion;
- Identify specific growth opportunities, such as outdoor, nature, adventure and sport;
- Bring “sport and nature closer together”;
- Effective marketing and promotion;
- Package “new experiences alongside well-established experiences with the emphasis on value for money” and family friendliness;
- Package the regions’ tourism offering better; and
- Invest in improved digital marketing (selected direct quotes from Saldanha Bay Municipality, 2017: 5-6).

Tourism sector survey

There is general agreement that the occupancy rate was low, even in peak season with many of the respondents indicating occupancy rates of less than 50%. Majority of accommodation establishments in the region catered for smaller groups of up to 10 guests with only a few establishments catering for more than 10 guests at a time. Online booking platforms accounted for the most (81%) reservations, followed by word of mouth (27%) and travel agents or operators (13,6%). The most common type of information requested by guests is about restaurants, activities to do in the region, and for maps and brochures of the region and emergency telephone numbers.

Accommodation establishments reported that the most useful type information they required was a foldout map and brochure. Strikingly, the majority (72%) of establishments are not star rated by the National Grading Council. Just more than half (53%) of respondents indicated that the STO played no role in the marketing of their businesses, but 52% believed that a tourism office was necessary even if there was adequate information available online and through regional maps and booklets. Most respondents were extremely happy about the idea of brochures being distributed to all restaurants, hospitality venues and other related businesses. This points to a decentralised information service model in partnership with the industry. Many respondents want a new tourism entity to be established, independent and separate from the municipality, but working in partnership with the local authority. Several respondents selected a hybrid model which means that some tourism-related functions will be retained within the municipality.

Media research

Media, including social media provide a wealth of information on tourist destinations (Ferreira & Donaldson, 2014; Bordelon & Ferreira, 2017). Social networks like Pinterest, YouTube, Instagram and Facebook are fast becoming virtual shop windows by illustrating the personal worlds of people through the images and videos they post. The proliferation of Internet technology has enabled regular consumers and travellers to share their thoughts, movements and experiences instantaneously, thereby steering the buying preferences and behaviour of their friends and followers who trust their opinions (Saldanha Bay Municipality, 2017).

The content analysis of social media sentiment reflected largely neutral (71%) sentiments with a fair share of positive sentiments (28%). These findings should be opportunities for shaping a new narrative around the study area and creating a proactive communication strategy. It became evident that there is virtually an online communication void regarding the Swellendam region with the region hardly featuring at all. The mentions on social media and the Web are typically impartial with a positive slant, but the danger exists that, because of a lack of proactive communication, incidents of negative reporting can fill the void and adversely influence the region's brand sentiment.

Swellendam and Barrydale emerged as the two most talked about towns in the study area (Figure 2). The activities related to the two towns that received the most coverage were: hiking, cycling, horse riding, fishing, camping, wine tasting and canoeing. The incidences of conversations about Barrydale followed an upward trend in a month-by-month comparison. Infanta recorded the lowest volume (29 mentions) of conversations and no theme was recognisable. Malgas had a similarly low volume of conversations and lack of themes except that Malgas Pont was mentioned as a good tourist experience. Stormsvlei generated a total of 382 mentions during the reporting period, 84% which were about a farm attack in the vicinity.

There was a positive note to the conversations about the Stormsvlei Mile equestrian event. Suurbraak was mostly referred to as a pitstop along the route to another destinations.

The domestic respondents who had travelled to the region in the previous five years typically did so for a weekend breakaway about every two months, or for a short holiday or school holiday break about twice a year. The Swellendam region is popular family destination with the majority (70%) visitors travelling there with their family or life partners.

The interviewees’ preferences for certain activities, attractions and features relate to food and wine, mountains and national parks, the ocean and climate as well as the hospitality and friendliness of local residents. These interests testify to a strong attraction to natural landscapes and cultural issues. Outdoor (physical) activities generally had a low attraction value but appealed to niche segments of the market. The interviewed visitors reported having had very pleasant experiences during their stay with the majority (90%) indicating that they were satisfied or very satisfied. Slightly more international visitors (63%) were very satisfied with their stay compared to domestic visitors (60%).

In calculating a basic satisfaction index, satisfaction values were set at intervals of 25 starting at 0 for Likert score 1, 25 for Likert score 2 and so on until 100 for Likert score 5. Generally, a satisfaction index value of less than 63 (the mid-point between neutral and agree) can be considered problematic. None of the seven ‘indicators’ used to determine an overall satisfaction index are problematic (Table 1), but it is noteworthy that cleanliness and safety issues scored the lowest.

Table 1: Satisfaction index values

Satisfaction indicators	Index value
The quality of the accommodation is good	84,45
The destination has unspoiled nature	84,09
Local people are very friendly	81,88
It is an affordable destination	80,73
Local cuisine is good	80,11
Personal safety and security up to standard	79,87
Overall cleanliness of the destination is exceptional	79,65

In response to the question “Have you heard about the *Cape Trade Route*” only 116 (15%) of the whole sample of respondents (768) had. To the follow-up question asking the respondents to explain where this route or area is located, a meagre 1% (11 of 768 respondents) named Swellendam. There is clear evidence that the then existing *Cape Trade Route* brand marketing was not successful as the brand was unfamiliar to most survey participants. The survey also determined that the visitors’ general knowledge about key tourist attractions and features in the region is limited. There is also a misconception about whether the region is part of the Garden Route or not and about the significance of the wine industry in the region.

Tour operator survey

The primary aim of this survey was to find out what opinions tour operators have about the Swellendam region as a tourism destination. Although the survey sample was small, the findings confirm that the *Cape Trade Route* brand was unfamiliar to tour operators, notwithstanding that they generally included Swellendam town in their tour portfolios. Swellendam is, however, only a stopover or, at most, a one-night destination en route somewhere else, with the two main towns (Barrydale and Swellendam) the main destinations in the region to visit. It is the mix of offerings – nature, history, culture, wine – in the region that appeals to the tour operators. Some of the salient findings of the foregoing data collection

exercises that have been used to inform the Swellendam Five-Year Tourism Strategy are discussed in the next section.

Key lessons

The Swellendam region is primarily a leisure destination and, to a lesser extent, are for visiting friends and relatives (VFR). The stakeholders agree that then region is not a viable business tourism destination, but they do concur that its leisure offering should be showcased better and developed creatively to include, for instance, more water-based activities and sporting events. They share the opinion that it is essential to develop a more family-friendly tourism offering. Moreover, because the region is visited mostly by white travellers (a typical challenge for most of South African tourism landscape - Bordelon & Ferreira 2019), there is a need to diversify the domestic tourism market. Although the town of Swellendam is by far the most visited (and known) place in the region, Barrydale is an established destination in its own right and a popular holiday and weekend getaway. Tourists' limited general knowledge about key tourist attractions and features in the region is worrying in terms of marketing. The *Cape Trade Route* brand intended to promote the region produced advertising campaigns that did not effectively communicate the brand image to local nor to international visitors.

The finding that South African visitors perceive the destination as offering opportunities for engaging in activities such as eating, drinking and experiencing the unique landscapes suggests that local public relations campaigns targeting intraprovincial visitors should continue to highlight these attributes. On the other hand, it appears that for international visitors the municipality should maintain the servicing of their infrastructure to make the travel experiences without discomfort as far as possible for first-time visitors, while encouraging and supporting the tourism industry to provide memorable experiences by using to good advantage the region's assets, local hospitality, cuisine and natural beauty. The sentiments gleaned from the study of social media demonstrate opportunities for shaping a new narrative around the study area and creating a proactive communication strategy using the identified themes to fill the communication and content void with engaging and inspiring content on the region through a diversity of voices of locals and visitors.

In light of the general decline in the use by prospective tourists of official destination websites and their growing use of review sites to get the information they need, DMOs have reacted by looking to the social media but this practice is largely experimental and the strategies vary significantly (Hays, Page & Buhalis, 2013). Tourists' decisions come back to trust. People trust the reviews posted by fellow travellers and the recommendations made by friends and followers. There is an attitude of not trusting tourism organisations. It is important however that travellers do not turn to review sites like TripAdvisor for inspiration. A tool like this is useful in the planning process when a traveller has finished dreaming about where to go and is ready to weigh up the offerings of local suppliers (Saldanha Bay Municipality, 2017).

Gilboa and Jaffe (2021: 115) have affirmed that “many city branding campaigns fail because they ignore input at the planning stage from local residents, who are among the most crucial stakeholders. Moreover, many campaigns that do consider residents fail to address the varying preferences, attitudes or needs of different groups.” Local governments or public-private partnerships are commonly the initiators of place branding, but there are minority of projects run by private agents (Andersson, 2014). The underlying principle of Swellendam's approach to their remarketing and rebranding processes is to put the visitor and resident at the centre of destination marketing and give citizens, the tourism industry and travellers a voice to help in sharing the unique stories of the region. This is in line with what today's travellers expect from the destinations they visit.

Whereas there are several courses or paths the rebranding and remarketing that can take Swellendam “into the future to deliver a viable and successful marketing strategy, three fundamental principles must form the foundation of the strategy. First, a strategy-led marketing process will be key to getting the basics right before implementing any new programmes. Second, a compelling and visually arresting brand with thumb-stopping content that delivers moments of inspiration to markets is necessary in combination with the right tools that will motivate trade, industry and business at large to sell the destination. Third, innovative marketing campaigns and local storytelling are required to give unique and local perspectives on the region and its towns and to ensure that local communities become active participants in the tourism marketing and offering of the region” (Swellendam Municipality, 2019: 44). Based on the findings of this study five key principles were identified which have informed and guided the Swellendam Municipality in devising a new tourism strategy. First, focus on a limited number of functions that the tourism organisation performs well while involving partners and members in marketing the region and improving in destination visitor experiences. Second, concentrate on the domestic market and a small number of highly productive market segments including family, outdoor activities, female and leisure, to maximise the impact of the organisation’s budget. Complement the efforts by working with WESGRO (the provincial marketing destination organisation), the surrounding regions, South African Tourism, and local trade and industry. Third, practice responsible tourism. Fourth, be global and future minded within a distinctively local context that showcases the greater Swellendam regions’ commitment to excellence in tourism. Last, to inspire citizens to be positive brand ambassadors for the region and to be actively involved in the promotion of the study area.

Six core themes were identified for framing the destination’s marketing strategy and brand positioning, namely tranquil nature; agri local produce; lifestyle; people, culture and heritage; adventure/sport/outdoor; and location. The municipality adopted the idea that the region should be positioned as an outdoor eventing mecca, purposefully capitalising on the region’s natural assets like the ocean, rivers and mountains to a fuller potential and creating new attractions making the most of the natural environment like a Coast to Klein Karoo Camino, a marathon (similar to Comrades) from Swellendam to Barrydale, more hiking trails, water-based activities and family-friendly cycling routes. A regional event strategy was proposed with a 12-months event calendar and presented in cross-regional packaging to ensure the whole region benefits from extended stays during events (Swellendam Municipality, 2020). Regarding marketing and branding, there are issues about whether the region is part of the Garden Route or not, and about the ‘significance’ of the wine industry in the region. Geographic boundaries do not really matter to visitors, rightly so. The region should therefore more strategically use its geographic location and accessibility as a gateway region to the Garden Route and Klein Karoo.

The Swellendam Municipality has subsequently taken cognisance of five trends for tourism marketing and branding and incorporated them in their latest Spatial Development Framework (Swellendam Municipality, 2020 - and listed in the 2019 adopted Swellendam Municipality tourism strategy). The first is the “economic shift which emphasises the importance of presenting the region’s value proposition through dynamic, value-for-money packages targeted at specific niche segments” (Swellendam Municipality, 2019: 27). Second, the “growing importance of the Web, social and influencer marketing means that the traveller is now the marketer and must be firmly placed at the centre of marketing strategies, plans” and communications (Swellendam Municipality, 2019: 27). Third is the understanding that the study area’s story is the only truly unique selling point. Therefore, attention must be centred on the experiential, the personal and the memorable. Fourth, so-called new travellers each with a distinctly “focused or niche interest, be it urban (short city breaks), lifestyle, solo-female,

special interest, foodies, “Bleisure”, cross-generational, family and millennial” (Swellendam Municipality, 2019: 27) must be catered for. Fifth, health, wellness and sustainability are significant contemporary components of tourism the region can provide for as a place to revive one’s life and reconnect with self, nature and others. Swellendam Municipality (2020: 56) has concluded that: “Adopting a new approach will not only create a strong destination brand and grow the overall tourism economy but will specifically open avenues for participation and ownership by historically disadvantaged persons in the tourism economy.” Consequently, the new brand adopted for the study area is a simple *Visit Swellendam*, with play, eat, stay and events in all seven towns as the key marketing foci.

Conclusion

Internet connections and free Wi-Fi are strong desirable travel perks that enable consumers to curate their travel aspirations, so this must be a vital area of investment for industry. The modern tourist is hyperconnected, well-informed, multi-channelled and demanding. The branding and marketing focus must be on improved user experiences and mobility with optimised mobile content and cross-regional experiences that get the traveller moving freely and easily to explore the region in totality. Swellendam Municipality’s tourism strategy must recognise the role of the internet, technology, influencers and storytelling in the digital marketing repertoire. Experiential travel is considered by international travel intelligence company Peak and Skift (2014) as the most significant, systematic trend in worldwide tourism today. It is all about travellers’ increasing desire to experience a destination by connecting to its people, culture and reconnecting with self. To keep pace with this trend, DMOs must adapt their strategies and double down on experience-driven marketing. The research findings make it evident that Swellendam Municipality’s tourism marketing and planning will have to focus on creating a new destination identity that unites the regions roleplayers. A destination marketing kit will provide the tourism industry with content, marketing guidelines and talking points to ensure strategic alignment. Subsequently, marketing must be innovative, impactful and one that attracts a mix of market segments (local, national and international). In this regard a focus on the domestic market, on festivals and local events, that is, niche segments are crucial. But as Rogerson and Rogerson (2021) note, geography matters regarding the economic turmoil unleashed by COVID-19, with spatially uneven impacts. They warn that “the most severe overall impacts potentially threaten the group of leisure tourism-dependent small towns in Western Cape province” such as the constituent towns of Swellendam Municipality (Rogerson & Rogerson 2021: 69). Just how destination brands will have to be adapted (or not) after the COVID-19 pandemic will indeed be a vital issue, especially for small towns.

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